

Harvest Time for the Soul

March 29, 2020

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

¹ The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD." ⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹ Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely. ¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own

soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD."

John 11: 1-45

¹ Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother.

²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." ²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." 43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." 45 Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.



As we begin this morning, we continue to wrestle with the idea of new life. As our "Seasons of the Soul"

Lenten series has progressed we have gone from soil to weeds to initial growth to sustaining growth and, last week, to the maturing of our wheat. This week we come to the harvest. The wheat must die and fall to the ground to be changed to produce something new. New life is the story we find both in Ezekiel 37 and in John 11. The dry bones and the dead body in the grave must both receive the same thing we need to live: the breath or the Spirit of God. Today, as we walk through the valley of dry bones with Ezekiel and as we see Lazarus walk out of the grave, may we too sense God stirring up new life in us as well. Let us pray...

The main idea of today's message is this: when all hope seems lost, God will bring new life. This is what happens in the valley and at the grave in today's passages. In these two passages, we can all find a connection point. This is true for all of us because we have all walked through a valley and we have all experienced some kind of loss. From my experience in the valleys and at times of loss, there comes a point in every trial or time of suffering when it seems too difficult to go on. To help you visualize this, picture someone covered in mud, failing at the obstacle course. Or picture someone on Ninja Warrior slowly slipping down the warp wall as their strength seems to give way. More emotionally challenging, envision a young widow standing, lost in sorrow at the grave of her dead husband. In each case, as one resigns, feeling totally defeated, there seems to be no hope of relief or revival or renewal – never mind any sign or hope of new life.



Over time, we as a society have come to understand death very well. Whether in caves, in holes, in fires, on towers or piers, or in graves, the body decayed. For thousands of years, people have understood well how it happens. In the process, humanity learned that death was a one-way street. In today's modern world we even attempt many things to delay the onset of death. But the sure reality is that death comes to us all.



In our first passage today, from Ezekiel 37, in a vision God brings the prophet out into a valley full of bones. As he walks around the valley, Ezekiel notes that the bones are very dry. The bones have been in the valley a long time. The bones are a metaphor for the people of Israel. Ezekiel was one of those taken into exile as the period of captivity began. By this point, they have been in exile for several years. Over the course of his time as prophet Ezekiel has been calling the people to repent and to return to God. But the Israelites' faith is dry and has no life to it. It has been this way for many years. The vision that Ezekiel receives is a vision of the future.

The vision begins with God asking Ezekiel, "*Mortal, can these bones live*"? The prophet answers, "*O Lord God, you know*". Perhaps this is just a literal question and answer. But perhaps it is a figurative question as well. Can the people, the nation of Israel, can they return to their covenant relationship with God? Ezekiel would certainly hope they could, but he is also fully aware that God is the only one in control. God instructs Ezekiel, in verses five and six, to tell the bones that God will cause sinew and flesh and skin to cover the dry bones and that God will cause breath to enter. Ezekiel prophesies as God had commanded and with a rattle the bones come together, bone to bone. Then, just as God had told, sinew and flesh and skin cover the bones. But, in verse eight, we read, "*But there was no breath in them*". God then commands Ezekiel to bring breath, to bring life into the bodies. He calls out, saying, "*Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live*". And live they do! In verse ten we see that a vast multitude stands in the valley where dry bones had laid.

Then, in verse eleven, God says that the bones represent the whole house of Israel. They feel dried up, their hope is lost, they feel cut off. Yet God will not leave them there. Ezekiel is instructed to go and to prophesy to the people, letting them know that God will restore them, that God will return them to the land from which they came. The passage closes with a reminder from God. In verse fourteen we hear these words: *"Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act"*. When the Israelites are reestablished in the land promised to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, then they will recall these words spoken through the prophet Ezekiel and they will know that God is God. We too can look back through the Old Testament, at the history of God's people, and we can know that God is always in control, that God always has a plan for his people.

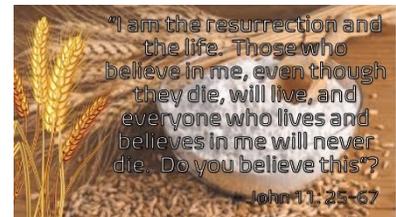
As we turn to this morning's New Testament passage, from John 11, we see that death has visited a family. Just as the Israelites were close to God's heart, so too are Mary, Martha, and Lazarus close to the heart of Jesus. Theirs is the house that he would frequent when passing through the area. This family was good friends with Jesus and his disciples. As our passage opens, we learn that Lazarus is ill. In verse four Jesus reveals to the disciples that this illness *"does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory"*. Jesus then stays two days longer.

As Jesus announces plans to go to Bethany, his disciples question this, reminding him that the Jews there were just trying to stone him. After assuring them that *"those who walk in the light do not stumble"*, they prepare to head to Bethany. Before departing Jesus tells them, in verse 11, *"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to awaken him"*. Thinking he is sleeping to recover more

quickly, Jesus plainly tells the disciples, "*Lazarus is dead*". Again, Jesus alludes to something happening for the disciples' sake, reiterating what he alluded to in verse four, saying, "*so that you may believe*".

By the time Jesus and the disciples arrive in Bethany, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. A large crowd has gathered to mourn with Mary and Martha. Martha goes out to meet Jesus as she hears that he is drawing near. As Martha speaks, we can still hear hope in her words. Reading from verses 22 and 23, we hear her hope: "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him*". Jesus reassures her in the next verse, saying, "*Your brother will rise*". Martha reveals her Jewish upbringing in her response: "*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection and life*". She is referring to the end time belief that all will rise when the Messiah comes. Here Jesus brings the future hope fully into the present. In verses 26 and 27 Jesus says:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this"?



Martha acknowledges that she believes as we do, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world. Mary is sent for and she too implies that if Jesus were here, Lazarus would have lived. Jesus becomes emotional, weeping openly, as he moves toward the tomb.

Jesus moves into unfamiliar territory for everyone there when he asks them to remove the stone. Although it has certainly been far less time than the bones that laid in Ezekiel's valley, Martha immediately protests, saying, *"Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days"*. Martha's reality is about to come face to face with Jesus' power. Claiming that authority, Jesus says to her, *"Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God"*? I cannot even begin to imagine what was spinning through Martha's head in that instant. It must have been much the same for Ezekiel as the bones we covered in sinew and flesh and skin. The stone is removed and looking heavenward Jesus draws the crowd's attention to what is about to happen.

In the book of John, there are only seven miracles. They begin with the water becoming wine at the wedding in Cana and they end with the raising of Lazarus. These seven miracles mirror the seven *"I am"* statements of Jesus found in the gospel of John. The last miracle ties into this statement still on the screen: *"I am the resurrection and the life"*. Suddenly, in a loud voice cries out, *"Lazarus, come out"*! And with that Lazarus emerges from the tomb. New life has been breathed into what was once dead. This day, many come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, as the Christ, as the Son of God.



Both of today's stories challenge everything we know about death, both literally and metaphorically. They challenge us because every possibility for living has ended. Only dry bones and stench and decay remain. There is no reason to be emotionally invested or to be newly concerned. In both stories, hope is dead.

But into one valley of death, God drags Ezekiel. In the place of death outside the tomb, Jesus drags in the disciples. Both Ezekiel and the disciples and the friends of Lazarus know that life is no more. But before their eyes that reality is redefined as life returns to the lifeless. My friends, God holds out the same promise of new life to all who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. My friends, the Savior asks us the same question he asked Martha: "*Do you believe*"?

This week, as we look forward to Easter even as we are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we perhaps stand in the stench, in the sorrow, and maybe even in the place of death. Yet even now, God promises to act to revive us again. As we draw closer to Easter, as we prepare for the hardest week of the Christian year, we have a reminder that our brutal, death-filled world can be flooded with the reality-shattering light and love of God again. That is God's promise to you and to me.

We will soon see – like Ezekiel, like Mary and Martha, and like the disciples – that death is not the end. Because of that, there is no ultimate separation from the love of God. If so, then what power does death have over us? What limit is there to God's love for this creation? For you and for me? Death has no power over us. There is no limit to God's love. We serve and follow a risen Savior. May we rejoice as we live the life of faith in the here and now. May we go forth to spiritually breath new lives into ourselves and into the lives of those around us. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) Grow. Where can you sense God wanting to breath new life into your faith? How can you open yourself up to this new possibility?
- 2) Pray. Who do you know that needs some new life – spiritually, emotionally, vocationally...? Pray for God to be at work in their life.
- 3) Study. Delve into the gospel of John. Study the seven “I am” statements that Jesus makes. (John 6:35, 8:12, 10:7, 10:11, 11:25, 14:6, and 15:1) What does each mean to you and to your faith?